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'This child was tortured'

Judge sends Isaac's foster mother to prison

July 3, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Isaac Lethbridge, a 2-year-old whose death highlighted problems in Michigan's child welfare system, died in agony after being burned with a hot iron and beaten repeatedly by someone in the Detroit foster home of Charlsie Adams-Rogers, a Detroit judge said Monday.

"Isaac screamed and he screamed and he screamed, and Mrs. Rogers was there and did absolutely nothing," Wayne County Circuit Judge Vera Massey Jones said as she sentenced Adams-Rogers to 5 1/2 to 15 years in prison for involuntary manslaughter.

"This child was tortured," Jones said. "The defendant was there, and it was her responsibility to stop it."

Adams-Rogers, 60, sat with head slightly bowed as she listened to the judge. A jury also found her guilty of second-degree child abuse, a four-year felony, but Jones sentenced her on that charge to time served -- the two weeks since she was jailed after her June 18 convictions.

Others -- particularly social workers from the Lula Belle Stewart Center and whoever in Adams-Rogers' home actually abused the boy -- also share the blame for what happened to Isaac, Jones said. Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Lisa Lindsey said the investigation continues and others may be charged.

The case was the subject of a three-part series in the Free Press in January that documented failings in the state's foster care system.

Karl Troy, the former Lula Belle foster care worker for Isaac and his 4-year-old sister, was given immunity to testify at the trial. According to his testimony, he and others at the agency failed to closely monitor the children's care and failed to address suspicions that someone was abusing the boy.

"The gentleman who was given immunity ... he never did the job," Jones said.

"I don't want to talk about what the social workers had done because I didn't see where they did anything that they should have done," the judge said. "Lula Belle Stewart and the social workers placed infants in a home where you have these young women and nobody is checking on anything." While in the home, Isaac and his sister often were watched by Adams-Rogers' then 12- and 18-year-old adopted daughters.

When told of the judge's comments, Ken Merritt, a Southfield lawyer who represents the Detroit-based Lula Belle agency, said the judge doesn't understand the complexities of the system.

"I'm not blaming her for it; she just doesn't have all the facts," Merritt said. "There are difficulties placing children in homes. There's not a whole lot of homes out there that are available that would be great for a child. You put them where you can. Your obligation is to place them somewhere."

Given a chance by Jones to say something, Adams-Rogers apologized. "I'm sorry about what did happen," she said in a barely audible voice. "But I never intended for any of this to ever happen in my home, and I do apologize."

Isaac's father, Matthew Lethbridge of Canton, said, "Her crime was one of the worst kinds of crimes. While acting like she wanted to help children and cared for so much about them, she really did not care at all. ... Isaac would be alive today had she done the right thing."

But Adams-Rogers daughter Dana Rogers said her mother was "convicted for something she did not do."

Laura Champagne, deputy director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, called Isaac's death a needless tragedy.

"An accredited private child placing agency was responsible for monitoring the foster home to ensure that this child was safe and properly cared for," Champagne said. "Now the court has determined that the foster parent failed to ensure the safety of this child and has granted some measure of justice for Isaac Lethbridge."

Much of the testimony in the trial addressed the emotional and behavioral problems of a 12-year-old girl, a former foster child adopted by Adams-Rogers whom police and prosecutors identified as the person who likely killed Isaac.

The judge wasn't so sure.

"Everybody wants to blame everything on her," the judge said, referring to the girl, now 13. But "I don't think any of us knows who killed the baby," Jones said.

She noted that there were at least two other adults in the home when Isaac died -- Deborah Roberts, an unemployed woman taken in by Adams-Rogers to help care for the foster children, and Leannea Jones, now 19, the biological half-sister of the 13-year-old girl. Both were adopted by Adams-Rogers last year.

The judge had rebuked Leannea Jones, who is not related to the judge, for an angry demeanor, rude responses and memory lapses at the trial. But the judge noted that the case was about Adams-Rogers and her "willful and wanton negligence" in failing to carry out her legal duty to protect foster children in her home.

"This is not a 'whodunit.' It's a 'on-whose-watch-it-was done,' " the judge said.

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July 3, 2007

Foster mom to do 5 1/2 -15

Detroit woman given prison term for failing to prevent abuse that led to death of 2-year-old Isaac.

Iveory Perkins / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- A foster care mother will spend 5 1/2 to 15 years in prison for failing to prevent beatings, burns and other abuse that ended in the death of 2-year-old Isaac Lethbridge.

After spending months blaming her adopted daughter for his murder, Charlsie Adams-Rogers apologized Monday before Wayne County Circuit Judge Vera Massey Jones, who sentenced her for involuntary manslaughter and second-degree child abuse.

"I'm sorry about what did happen," said Adams-Rogers, 60, of Detroit, according to her lawyer, Warren Harris. "But I never intended for any of this to ever happen in my home, and I do apologize."

Two weeks of testimony that culminated in a jury's quick conviction June 18 showed that Isaac died from multiple blunt force injuries and burns on Aug. 16. Six adults and eight children were living in Adams-Rogers' three-bedroom home at the time, but all claim to have seen or heard nothing.

Isaac had been transferred from another foster home just weeks earlier because of abuse claims.

The sentence makes Adams-Rogers the second high-profile foster parent in Michigan to go to prison since the fall for a child's death. Williamston mother Lisa Holland was sentenced to life in November for the July 2005 murder of Ricky Holland, 7.

"The death of this little boy was a needless tragedy," said Laura Champagne, chief deputy for the state Department of Human Services. "Now the court has determined the foster parent failed to ensure the safety of this child and has granted some measure of justice for Isaac Lethbridge."

"This is also an important reminder that protecting children is a shared responsibility that requires the support and commitment of the entire community."

Adams-Rogers consistently blamed her adopted daughter, then 12, for Isaac's death. A written statement heard during the trial claimed the girl repeatedly threw Isaac on a mattress, and missed shortly before his death. Testimony showed the boy also suffered burns from cigarettes and an iron.

The girl has since been placed in another foster home and is undergoing mental health treatment.

Although authorities still haven't concluded who killed Isaac, prosecutors said Adams-Rogers' sentence is just.

"She is responsible for what went on in her house and for not stopping what went on because she was fully aware based on the child's injuries," said Lisa Lindsey, an assistant prosecutor. "However, I still think there is concern about exactly what happened."

Adams-Rogers, who was acquitted of fourth-degree child abuse charges involving Isaac's older sister, is expected to appeal the conviction, Harris said.

"The prosecutor did ask the court to go above the (sentencing) guidelines, and the court declined," Harris said. "I have no criticism of the court. (Adams-Rogers) is going to make the most of it, she is sorry for what happened and never wanted a child to die in her care."

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Higher bond sought in infant abuse case

Man accused of exposing himself.

By Jameson Cook
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Prosecutors will ask a judge today to raise the bond of a man accused of nearly killing his baby after he was arrested again for exposing himself at a park.

Ted Wieckhorst, 20, of Eastpointe, has been free on a \$20,000 bond on a charge of first-degree child abuse, accused of inflicting severe injuries on his 5-week daughter.

Assistant Macomb prosecutor Therese Tobin will request this morning that Judge Antonio Viviano up his bond after learning Wieckhorst received a misdemeanor ticket for exposing his genitals at a city park and recently lost his job at a restaurant, both potential violations of bond conditions.

Police said children and adults witnessed the incident about 1:40 p.m. June 9 at Kennedy Park on Schroeder, where families and groups congregate for picnics and activities.

Police indicate that Wieckhorst pulled down his pants and said, "Suck my ----," to other people, Tobin said. She said Wieckhorst explained that his pants fell down accidentally.

He is scheduled to appear in 38th District Court in Eastpointe on Thursday.

Wieckhorst's attorney, Steven Vernier, said Monday that he will argue that Wieckhorst's conduct wasn't extreme enough to warrant raising the bond. Wieckhorst's sister was involved in an altercation, and he went to defend her, Vernier said.

"At worst he lost his temper," Vernier said. "I can't believe this isolated confrontation in the park means he represents a danger to society, especially because he was coming to his sister's aid."

Wieckhorst originally was in the Macomb County Jail on a \$500,000 bond, but Judge Viviano on Feb. 8 reduced it to \$20,000, cash or surety. Wieckhorst posted bond and was released five days later.

Wieckhorst had been working as a dishwasher or busboy at a restaurant but was fired a few weeks ago, according to Vernier, after an anonymous person was frequently making phone calls to the restaurant to say it was employing "a baby killer."

"He's had a hard time getting a job since," Vernier said.

Wieckhorst was arrested after his 5-week-old daughter was brought to a hospital Dec. 14 with the severe injuries. She suffered brain and retinal bleeding, and a skull fractures. She has no cognitive abilities.

Wieckhorst told police he may have bumped her head against a bed board and caused a cut on her lip with a ring.

Vernier gained approval to hire an expert to determine whether the girl could have suffered the injuries another way.

First-degree child abuse carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison, and prosecutors are not offering a plea deal.

Wieckhorst and the mother of the victim also have another 2-year-old child who has been removed from the mother's care and placed by state child protection workers with the maternal great-grandmother.

Wieckhorst is to have no contact with the children.

After he was charged, he moved from his mother's home in Eastpointe to his father's in Clinton Township. He recently moved back with his mother in Eastpointe, Vernier said.

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GRAPHIC

3 child abuse cases

By Michael Jones, Staff Writer · Posted: Tuesday, July 3, 2007 9:00 AM EDT

GAYLORD — In the past two weeks three alleged acts of violence against area children have brought the issue of abuse in Otsego County to the forefront, and area officials are encouraging residents to get involved.

Bringing the issue into greater focus:

- the June 21 death of 2-year-old Ella Westcott of Gaylord, which Gaylord City Police are investigating as a homicide;

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- the June 18 arrest of Xavier Baker of Gaylord for allegedly beating a 2-year-old with a belt; and

- the June 21 criminal sexual conduct arraignment of Jeffrey McCarrick, charged with five counts of sexually assaulting two females under the age of 13.

Each is an example of the perils to which children may fall victim.

"If someone feels a child is being injured or is in danger of being injured, they should call 9-1-1," said Bruce Bailey at the Dept. of Human Services (DHS) for Otsego County. Bailey said anyone who suspects the abuse, neglect or exploitation of a child should contact DHS at 732-1702 or after business hours by calling 800-627-7031.

"People need to understand how important it is to report suspected abuse so we can



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investigate it,” City Police Chief Joe FitzGerald said. “If you see a child with bruises or cuts, or there seems to be a pattern of injuries being explained away as the child having fallen down, we would hope you would report it. If we don’t know about it we can’t investigate it.”

Maureen Sorbet, spokesperson for the Michigan DHS, said there are a number of potential indicators which could be evidence a child may be the victim of abuse or neglect. Typically they fall into one of two categories – physical and behavioral. “The best thing for someone to do if they suspect abuse is to contact DHS and let them investigate,” she stressed.

Sorbet said physical indicators of abuse include unexplained bruises and welts, burns and scalds, and missing clumps of hair. Behavioral indicators include self-mutilation, running away, and withdrawn or aggressive behavior.

Suspected abuse, she continued, may be reported anonymously and information given to case workers remains confidential. “I would think an individual would personally report any abuse they may witness,” she said. “The public has a big role in helping to combat child abuse; they are the eyes and ears to help us with this.”

While Sorbet said she would hope anyone who has observed alleged abuse would report it to the proper authorities, some individuals are required by law to report any suspected abuse. Those obligated include health care providers, mental health providers, social service workers, child care providers, teachers, members of the clergy and law enforcement.

Sorbet said stress within a family could increase the chances of child abuse but, to date, referrals for child abuse have remained steady in Michigan, despite high unemployment rates and a lackluster economy.

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Macomb County news briefs

The Detroit Free Press

July 3, 2007

Portrait gallery to feature children in foster care

Portraits of some of the more than 300 children in Michigan waiting to be adopted out of foster care are featured in the 2007 Michigan Heart Gallery, on display through July 25 at the Clinton-Macomb Public Library, 40900 Romeo Plank.

An exhibit opening will be held 5-7 p.m. next Tuesday.

The Michigan Heart Gallery is a collaborative effort between the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange, the Adoptive Family Support Network, and the Michigan Department of Human Services.

"Most of the children featured in the Heart Gallery have been waiting for a long time to find a family of their own," Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, said in a statement.

The Heart Gallery will also feature portraits of some successful adoptive families.

For more information, visit the Michigan Heart Gallery's Web site at www.miheart.org.

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Article published Jul 3, 2007

Pratt to stand trial for assault on girlfriend

Trace Christenson

The Enquirer

A Marshall man, Christopher Pratt, has been ordered to stand trial on charges that he assaulted his girlfriend.

Pratt, 39, a person of interest in the 2004 disappearance of his former fiancée, Mary Lands, threw chairs, broke telephones and wouldn't allow his current 35-year-old girlfriend to leave the house, the woman testified before Calhoun County District Judge Samuel Durham on Monday.

"He threw two chairs at me, ripped the phones out of the wall and threw a baker's rack at me," she said. "He told me to get out of the house and that he hated me."

Pratt was arrested by Michigan State Police on June 24 at the home he shared with the woman in Fredonia Township. He faces charges of felonious assault, interfering with an electronic communications device and domestic violence. After the preliminary examination, a charge of unlawful imprisonment was added.

Pratt also was arrested on a charge of criminal sexual conduct after the woman said Pratt forced her to have sex several times. The charge was dismissed and reissued Monday after prosecutors said they needed more specific information. Pratt is expected to be arraigned on that charge today.

(The Enquirer is not using the name of the victim in the assault because she is an alleged victim in a sexual assault.)

The woman testified that she and Pratt began to argue, and he would not allow her to leave the house.

"I tried to walk out of the room," she said, "and he picked me up in a bear hug and pulled me down on the couch. He was laughing like it was a big joke. I told him to let me go, let me out of here and he just stood there laughing at me."

She told Chief Assistant Prosecutor Daniel Buscher that Pratt began throwing chairs at her, injuring her ankle and hand and then broke two phones when she tried to call for help.

The woman said Pratt grabbed her keys and threw them out of the house.

When she told one of her sons to go to a neighbor's house, the woman said Pratt left in his truck.

The woman told defense attorney J. Thomas Schaeffer that they started to argue because Pratt accused her of hiding something from him.

She denied she threw anything at Pratt and said she had called police during the Memorial Day weekend because she was assaulted.

"I never threw a phone at him, and I never did anything to him," she said. "I wanted out of this relationship for quite a while, and he said it is not in my best interest to leave."

Pratt was living with Lands, 39, when she disappeared March 12, 2004. She has not been found and Marshall police believe she is a victim of foul play.

After sending the case to Circuit Court for trial, Durham lowered the bond from \$250,000 to \$25,000.

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Cuts Made to Private Transportation Services

July 3, 2007 07:28 AM EDT



Some Jackson area seniors are scrambling to find a way to their doctor's appointments. That is because the rides they came to depend on are no longer available. The Michigan Department of Human Services has cut Medicaid funding to private transportation services. Phillis Clemons dreads answering the phone.

Phylis Clemons, Clemons Transportation: "Right now they're only doing wheelchair."

Her customers are in a panic. She runs a service that takes seniors to and from doctor's appointments. Until now, she received payments from Medicaid, but much of that money is going away. Now Clemons has to turn away dozens of patients.

Phylis Clemons: "You have to kind of turn cold to it in order to follow guidelines."

The Michigan Department of Human Services says transportation companies in Jackson were getting more funding from Medicaid than any other county. That's because Jackson companies were paid a flat rate. Now those companies will be reimbursed for only a portion of the mileage. Clemons says that means companies like hers can no longer afford to provide the same type of service. That means seniors will have to turn to their families.

Phylis Clemons: "If no one else will step up to the plate, I will."

Carmen Reynolds-Gwen drove all the way from Ann Arbor to take her mother to dialysis. She says she's the only one who can do now that Clemons can't.

Carmen Reynolds-Gwen: "She has no life and they pull this?"

At least for Reynolds-Gwinn's mother, there is an option. Others are forced to wait and hope they too will be able to get a ride. The Department of Human Services says that it will encourage seniors to find a family or friend to give them a ride. The next option is to catch the bus, but in extreme cases, the state may be able to help.



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Costly Social Security loophole is closed

By SCOTT AIKEN
H-P Staff Writer

ST. JOSEPH — Most of the 202 people arrested following an extensive investigation of Social Security fraud in Berrien County have pleaded guilty to criminal charges.

Of those charged, 187 have pleaded guilty to either felony or misdemeanor charges. Twelve are still being sought on arrest warrants.

Operation Raincheck, conducted by area police agencies and federal authorities, targeted people who defrauded the federal government by falsely claiming checks were lost or stolen.

Replacement checks would then be obtained and cashed, along with the originals, a process that some people repeated to bilk the government out of thousands of dollars.

It was a way of doing business for a lot of people and that surprises me, Berrien Chief Assistant Prosecutor Michael Sepic said Monday after eight defendants were sentenced.

Capping a six-month investigation, authorities announced in May that warrants had been issued in double checking scams.

Some defendants who received state financial assistance were charged with welfare fraud for failing to report illicit Social Security income.

Charges were also filed in cases where people living in federally subsidized housing did not report the fraudulent income.

The amount stolen in all the cases combined from 2001-06 was \$578,745, authorities said. Restitution is ordered in all cases at sentencing.

On Monday, Berrien Trial Court Judge Charles LaSata sentenced eight people. All got jail time, in some cases only a day or two with credit for time served.

They're all very serious felony offenses, LaSata told the defendants as a group.

LaSata told the offenders they will be required to pay back the stolen money and for some that will mean getting jobs after being released from jail.

He said some of the defendants are a drag on society, like canoe passengers who refuse to paddle.

For too long now we've had people who weren't paddling

hard enough," LaSata said.

According to officials, much of the fraud involved "double checking" payments of supplemental security income from Social Security to low-income people

who are unable to work or who have children with disabilities. The maximum payment is about \$600 a month.

Because low-income people depend on the checks to meet living expenses, the Social Security Administration, as required by a federal court decision, issues a replacement check immediately when a recipient claims a check was not received. When authorities determine that both checks were cashed by the same person, charges may be filed.

Sepic said that of the 202 people charged, 145 pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges. Of those sentenced, eight received jail time, 48 were placed on probation and 97 were ordered to pay fines and costs. Of the 42 people who pleaded guilty to felony charges, 23, were given jail time.

Among those sentenced Monday was Lesheika Jett, 24, of South Bend, Ind., who received 90 days in jail for obtaining \$1,000 to \$20,000 by false pretenses "making false Social Security claims" and welfare fraud over \$500. She was also sentenced to a concurrent 90-day jail term for obtaining \$200-\$1,000 by false pretenses, a misdemeanor, for failing to report income while receiving subsidized housing benefits.

As part of her sentence Jett was ordered to pay \$21,923 in restitution to the Social Security Administration, and \$7,902 to the Michigan Department of Human Services and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, plus a fine and costs. Three charges were dismissed as part of a plea agreement.

Sepic said that even after the inspector general's investigation was completed, Jett made four additional fraudulent check claims.

LaSata rebuked Jett for the recurring nature of her crimes.

"It didn't happen once, it didn't happen twice," LaSata said, tallying up the restitution total of nearly \$30,000.

"You're engaging in this criminal activity without any remorse. You're going to take what you can take."

Attorney Ernest White, who represents Jett and other defendants in the Social Security fraud cases, said many people do not see getting extra checks as a crime.

"The word on the street was this was a loophole," White told the judge.

Alice Smith, 21, of Benton Harbor avoided jail after her probation officer told LaSata that she had stayed out of trouble since a probation term for an unrelated assault and battery conviction began in January. Smith pleaded guilty to obtaining \$1,000-\$20,000 by false pretenses.

She was sentenced to pay \$4,538 in restitution to the Social Security Administration, \$1,176 to HUD, plus a fine and costs. She is to continue on probation through December.

Also sentenced Monday were:

â—† Jessica Swift, 28, Benton Harbor, seven days in jail (credit for seven days served), five years probation, \$4,054 restitution, plus fine and costs, for welfare fraud over \$500, failing to inform the state DHS of circumstances affecting her eligibility for benefits.

â—† Carolyn J. Foster, 45, Benton Harbor, seven days in jail and \$5,125 restitution for obtaining from \$200-\$1,000 by false pretenses from the Social Security Administration.

â—† Lori Smith, 23, Benton Harbor, 15 days in jail, five years probation, \$10,426 restitution, plus fine and costs for welfare fraud over \$500, failing to inform the state DHS of circumstances affecting her eligibility for benefits.

â—† Danny Teets, 41, Bloomingdale, three days in jail, \$4,564 restitution, plus a fine and costs for obtaining \$200-\$1,000 by false pretenses from the Social Security Administration.

â—† Nashonna Perry, 30, Benton Harbor, 60 days in jail, two years probation, \$3,923 restitution, plus fine and costs for obtaining \$1,000-\$20,000 by false pretenses from the Social Security Administration.

â—† Claudia Robinson, 44, Kalamazoo, three days in jail, with credit for one day served, \$4,199 restitution, plus fine and costs for obtaining \$1,000-\$20,000 by false pretenses from the Social Security Administration.